

It was always about the music. Or maybe it was always about writing. Probably both.

It might have started with an ancient 78 record player I had as a kid and a bunch of 78s to go with it. I'd stay in my room for hours and play record after record. Some were kiddie records, but there was other stuff as well: old jazz, Louie Armstrong, folk songs, cowboy songs, union songs by the Almanac Singers, box sets for kids of the story of Mozart and Haydn, even Jimmie Durante. Down stairs was the hi-fi as they were called back then and the real records, the 33s. Mostly classical, but mixed in with the classical albums was a ten-inch album on Folkways called *This Land Is MyLand* that had a bunch of different people on it like Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Cisco Houston and Leadbelly. It didn't even have the right song titles on it. "Old Blue" and "Dark As A Dungeon" by Cisco Houston were titled "Hunting Dog Song" and "Miner's Song." The Woody Guthrie song, a talking blues listed as "Irrigation Song," that turned out to be "Talking Columbia," would crack me up 'cause of the way he said "EEEEEE-lec-tric-ity." There was another ten-inch Folkways album by Leadbelly called *Take This Hammer* and an album by The Weavers. Leadbelly was dead by this time and Woody no longer performed, but my parents had seen them both and I probably endlessly asked them again and again what they were like.

At the same time on AM radio there was Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers, Hank Ballard, Lloyd Price, the Coasters. There was an old f-hole guitar around the house that my Mom would play every now and then, and one of my uncles also played the guitar. My brother picked it up one day and started playing. I was a bit more interested in the typewriter which I learned to use pretty soon after I learned how to write. About once a year Pete Seeger or The Weavers would come to town for a concert. It was a big deal. We'd have to get dressed up in a jacket and tie.

I was always writing. Poems mostly, some stories. Put out a little newspaper I'd send to my cousins and ask them to write for it. In the sixth grade I went to a private school called Miquon. It was different than other schools. It was in the woods in a bunch of little buildings. There weren't any marks, and you called the teachers by their first names. Instead of making you feel small as John Lennon said, they'd encourage you to do create. There was a kid there named Ray who played the guitar and was already performing. At the end of that year, my parents took me to a Pete Seeger concert. In addition to the folk songs he usually sang, he did a lot of songs by some new songwriters. Two of the songs that stuck in my mind were "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and "Who Killed Davey Moore." I couldn't remember hearing anything like them. That summer my family moved to northern New Jersey outside of New York City while I went to some camp in Maryland. There was a song on the radio the entire summer called "Blowin' In the Wind" by Peter, Paul & Mary. When I returned home

at the end of the summer, my brother told me about this guy Bob Dylan and played me a bunch of his songs on the guitar. I quickly found out that this was the guy who not only wrote the song I'd been hearing on the radio all summer, but wrote the songs Pete Seeger sang as well. A couple of nights later Bob Dylan was on TV on some show about Freedom Songs. Everything changed.

Later that fall JFK was shot. After lunch we waited a really long time for the teacher to show up in the classroom. Finally she appeared and announced, "Your President Has Been Shot." They marched everyone into the auditorium to watch some movie we'd already seen and then sent everyone home. Eight days later I saw Bob Dylan perform for the first time in Newark, New Jersey. There weren't very many people there. My brother and I had seats in the balcony, but at intermission we snuck down to the eighth row. A month or so later, The Beatles happened, then the Rolling Stones. Things were changing and changing fast.

The Vietnam war was escalating at a rapid pace, there were new developments in the civil rights movement on a daily basis and people were looking for and finding different ways of expressing themselves, though few seemed to notice any of this in the town I lived in, or if they did notice it, they weren't too pleased by any of it. There was a small mountain a few blocks from my house and I used to climb to the top, look at the New York skyline and dream.

But it was mainly the music I cared about. Whenever we had some money we'd buy another album. The connections were starting to take shape. A John Hammond album led to Muddy Waters. Muddy Waters led to Howling Wolf, Little Walter and Jimmy Reed. And there was other stuff on radio which was a lot different in those days. You could hear Roger Miller, Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Frank Sinatra, Motown, James Brown, the Beach Boys, the animals, sometimes one right after the other. Somewhere in the midst of all this Dylan went electric. I'd been trying to teach myself the banjo, but who wanted to play the banjo when there was rock and roll. I started picking up my brother's guitar and teaching myself chords when he wasn't around.

In New York, there were concerts constantly. On Sunday, afternoons *Broadside* Magazine, which published the songs of all the singer-songwriters in NY held hoots at the Village Gate which cost a dollar. They'd last for a few hours and you could see Phil Ochs, Eric Andersen, Pete LaFarge, Pat Sky, Buffy Sainte-Marie as well as some people like Jack Elliott and Dave Van Ronk in one shot. In the summer there were shows in Central Park at Wollman Skating Rink also for a dollar. I saw the Byrds, Smokey and the Miracles, Son House, Big Boy Crudup, Junior Wells, the Butterfield Blues Band and many others.

The radio was on constantly. At 11, Jean Shepherd and at midnight "Radio Unnameable" with Bob Fass, which remains the greatest radio show I ever heard in my life. It went from midnight to exhaustion and *anything* could happen. Fass played all kinds of music, old blues, old-time fiddle, unreleased Bob Dylan, Indian Ragas, Lenny Bruce, Lord Buckley, poets like Allen Ginsberg. He'd do sound collages, LBJ speeches with bombs dropping and storm troopers marching in the background. Musicians would show up and play at any time of the night. The Mothers of Invention, the Incredible String Band, Arlo Guthrie, Jerry Jeff Walker. Poets would read, actors would show up and act. Bob Dylan took phone calls one night. Paul Krassner from the *Realist*, activists like Emmet Grogan and Abbie Hoffman. A good deal of the Chicago demonstrations at the Democratic Convention in 1968 and the March on the Pentagon were planned live on the air at that show.

Somewhere around this time FM radio started to play rock and roll which caused a revolution in music and seemed to affect everything else. It was an exciting time. New groups kept appearing and musicians were taking chances, the psychedelic movement, blues bands using horns, Jimi Hendrix, The Who. What was happening in music was happening in all the arts, films, painting, poetry, the theater, and it was also happening in the streets. And then in the midst of this, Dylan came back on the scene and ignored everything that had happened with his *John Wesley Harding* album. Back to basics time and soon everyone followed suit. Not long after, *Music From Big* by The Band came out. No one had made an album like that one before. The Byrds went to Nashville and released *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*. And just as a John Hammond album opened up the world of blues years before, this album led to Merle Haggard, as well as people I already knew about but hadn't paid that much attention to, Johnny Cash, the Everly Brothers, Hank Williams.

Somewhere around this time I started writing songs. They weren't very good, but I sang them anyway. What had been poems ended up in songs, I guess. There were very good musicians around, that I couldn't touch, so I kept my playing to myself.

Somehow I started living in New York City, crashing at various places, finally ending up in some tenement on the Lower East Side. My friend Ray lived a few blocks away and we were listening to a lot of country music. It wasn't long after this that he moved to some tiny town in West Virginia and formed Asleep At The Wheel. There was another kid in my building from North Carolina who was a magician. Every now and then we'd go out on the streets and he'd do magic tricks and I'd play the guitar. We'd try to make enough money to get some dinner.

For some reason, I ended up going back to my hometown, Philadelphia. Started trying to play out, and my first gig was doing a guest set for Mississippi Fred McDowell at some tiny coffeehouse. At some point during the night Allen Ginsberg showed up. Eventually met some people who liked the same music I did. By this time I'd discovered George Jones, probably the greatest country music singer ever. At the time there were record stores that sold cut out albums and over runs real cheap for two dollars sometimes less. Every time I went to one of these stores, I found another George Jones album, or albums by other country singers. It wasn't long before I had something like 30 George Jones albums and none of them cost more than four dollars.

I started in working in a record store. At first it was kind of fun, but after a year I became the manager of the record department, which wasn't as much fun. I'd play gig wherever I could get them. I became a volunteer at a community radio station and started doing shows. Folk shows, country shows, blues shows. The best were the all night shows where you could play anything and weren't stuck in a format. I started using what I'd learned from staying up all night listening to Bob Fass and every other radio show I'd ever heard as well, letting the music take you somewhere. The station had an incredible record library, and I loved totally mixing it up segueing from African drum chants to Wilson Pickett or Irish music to Bill Monroe. Jazz to Mozart. Anything was possible. Around this time it dawned on me that if a musician was coming to town and called up their manager or publicity person and said radio, they were usually interested, much more than if you called and said you were a freelance writer. So I started taking a tape recorder to shows and interviewing musicians. I think my first was with Sylvia Tyson of Ian & Sylvia, then George Jones on his tour bus. Then Arlo Guthrie. Since a lot of these were done backstage usually before a show, they weren't very extensive. It all depended. George Jones kept me waiting for hours. Rick Danko talked to me for an hour. When I interviewed James Brown, at the venue they said, you have to talk to "the Reverend." "The Reverend" turned out to be Al Sharpton who wasn't well known at the time, but would be a few years later. The interview turned out to be a press conference with several reporters. My favorite interview was Muddy Waters. It was truly like meeting a king. There was something totally regal about him, yet he was totally down to earth at the same time and genuinely nice guy.

Around this time I decided I finally had songs that were good enough to make a demo. I rounded up a bunch of friends and went into the studio for a couple of days. Things changed right up to the last minute. One of the guitar players showed up at the session with a killer guitar player who also played pedal steel, so the other guitar player switched to piano at the last minute.

Around the time I made the demo, the radio gig ended, but soon I started writing articles on music for a local weekly. After a few articles they asked me to do a regular column. I also had a bunch of crazy jobs. One was being a strand mapper, which means you walk around with a wheel on a stick measuring distances between telephone poles and marking it on a map. It was summer and you'd just find the beginning of a telephone line and follow it. This meant going through people's yards, fording streams, getting chased by dogs, seeing all kinds of animals.

Then I got a job as a courier driving my car all over the place. I'd go into work in the morning and never knew where I might end up at the end of the day. My first job was to the casinos at Atlantic City. I drove as far north as Boston (300 miles) and as far south as Washington D.C. I delivered all kinds of things. Guns for the US Army, a human heart for an autopsy, which was in a plastic container not different than one you'd put coleslaw in. My favorite was when I had to deliver a package to Julie Nixon Eisenhower. I kept trying to look inside her house to see if Nixon was around. You quickly learned to take care of business on the road. Need new shoes, stop at a mall. One guy carried a fishing rod in his car and if he saw a nice pond, he'd stop and go fishing. You'd wind up in all kinds of insane adventures. I was in a few car chases that easily could have been in the *Rockford Files*. Around this time, I formed a band with another guy who worked there as a bike messenger. I always had press kits with me in the car and if I was near a club, I'd drop them off. The owner of the courier place came to see the band and had a good time so he started buying us equipment. The Band was called The Others and we built up a small following in the area, even playing a live show on radio. But it broke up after about a year for some reason I've never figured out. I put another band together and kept the name. There ended up being about three different groups of Others.

At the same time I was still writing my column and had added another column for a monthly regional music magazine and another weekly column for an entertainment paper that covered New York, New Jersey, Philly and Connecticut.

Then a job opened up at the paper I was writing for as typesetter. It was part-time but I took it. It was better than driving around all day. The paper was growing and the job started being a daily thing. There were some good writers for the paper, and when the writing was good the job was enjoyable. After about a year I became production manager, doing the layout. And then just naturally I started editing the articles. In the meantime, I formed a couple of more bands, the first being the Fulminators.

Shortly after I formed the Fulminators I stopped in a gas station one night to pick up a pack of smokes. As I reached for my wallet to pay for it, I felt someone grabbing my wallet. He said, "Give me your credit cards." I said,

"I don't have any credit cards." The next thing I knew I was lying on the ground. I felt my lower jaw and I could move it back and forth. Someone waved down a cop and they took me to the hospital. Every bone in my face was broken. They took me in for x-rays and it was so painful to put my face against the machine I jumped back on the stretcher. The hospital called my roommate who rushed over and I had him call my dad. Shortly after my dad arrived and probably because he arrived, I heard one of the nurses or medics say, "Give him morphine." While I was in the hospital, Bob Dylan's publicity person Elliot Mintz called me at the paper. I couldn't believe it. Finally they call and I'm not there. They sent me home a couple of days later and I had to go back a few days after that for a major operation. I still don't know how long that operation was, but it seemed like a long time. I woke up and my jaw was wired shut. I didn't have medical insurance. All the clubs I'd played and wrote about in Philly and many bands and musicians held benefits. At the first benefit, I got onstage with the Ben Vaughn Combo and through clenched teeth did "Everything Is Broken."

It took a long time to recover and various other operations took place over the years. A few months later I was back playing with the Fulminators. Eventually that band fell apart and then I just started playing with a couple of friends, Paul Fredrickson and Mike Vogelmann in my basement. We ended up calling it The Fumblers. At first it was a three piece, which forced me to play lead guitar. Then one day another friend, Dan Montgomery showed up. Soon we were a four-piece, and Dan was writing songs like mad. Every once in a while we'd play a gig. We didn't care too much about playing out because we were having just as much if not more fun in the basement. Around this time I got a hold of Bob Dylan's "Hard Rain" video. It became a band tradition to watch "Maggie's Farm" before every gig. We had this crazy idea to do a "Hard Rain" tribute show. One day Dan came to the door for a band rehearsal and said, "It's the Rolling Fumbler Revue." I booked a club and all kinds of craziness ensued. We ended up having something like 16 other musicians, each doing a couple of songs and we backed them up. The rehearsals took place over two hectic weeks. We'd rehearse with three or four different people a night. It was a totally insane thing to do.

Meanwhile I'd become music editor of the paper, but the paper had a new publisher and things were changing constantly. You never knew who was going to still be there when you went in. The other editors started quitting and soon it became my turn to leave. For years Ray Benson had been telling me to come down to Austin and record in his studio, Bismieux. I took him up on it. He hooked me up with his chief engineer Frank Campbell, who was also a fine bass player. I had no idea what would happen working with other musicians. My drummer from the Fumblers who'd gone through some changes, Turk McFadden (who had played on my

first demo) offered to come down. Frank went about hiring musicians, and a friend suggested one of the guitar players Casper Rawls.

Since I was getting a deal on studio time, we had to work around other sessions which mean recording in the morning and late at night. Some of the best musicians in Austin, one of my favorite towns, played on it. Cindy Cashdollar played lap steel and dobro, and Tim Alexander played keyboards. They were both in Asleep At The Wheel At The Time. Casper Rawls played guitar with several Austin musicians and was in the band, The LeRoi Brothers. The other keyboard player, Ron Huckaby was in George Strait's band at the time. Frank totally understood my music and pretty much ended up producing the album. We'd be watching one of the players and after the track was done, Frank would make a comment about it that was exactly what was in my mind.

I returned home and shopped the album for a year. During this time I discovered the Internet and started using that to find record companies. There were a couple of almost deals that never happened. Just as I was about to give up, I found a tiny new independent company for singer-songwriters Tangible Music. The guy who ran it Gary Brody called me up and asked for a DAT instead of a cassette. It was Christmas, and it took a long time for the Dat to get there. One night he called again and talked to me for over an hour. A few weeks later, in fact returning home from yet another operation, a contract came in the mail

It was another six months before the album came out. Tangible Music concentrated mostly on radio and soon the album was on about 75 stations nationwide. Around Christmas it hit the Americana chart.

I started booking myself trying to get farther and father from Philly. I soon learned that being on the road is a very good way to go totally broke.

Meanwhile things were happening on the Internet. I wrote a couple of articles for Bobdylan.com that resulted in a lot of email. One day I received an email from someone named CP Lee saying I'm coming to America and I want to visit you. I barely knew who he was, but he had written a book on Bob Dylan's 1966 English tour, "Like The Night" that was about to be published. A year later I found myself playing pubs in and around Manchester thanks to him. It was the time of my life.

And since then I've been doing what I've always done, playing bars, coffeehouses and clubs up and down the East Coast and anywhere else I can, occasionally opening for more famous acts, and writing articles about music I like. For the past couple of years I've had the good fortune to be working with an amazing guitar player named Larry Broido and hopefully we'll get a chance to make a record together. In the past year I've

discovered that there's some people out there who like my songs enough to learn and sing them. Some of these people are in places far away, like England, Canada, New Foundland and South Carolina. And that's just the ones I know about. In the end, maybe that's what writing songs is all about. Having someone else like them enough to sing them.